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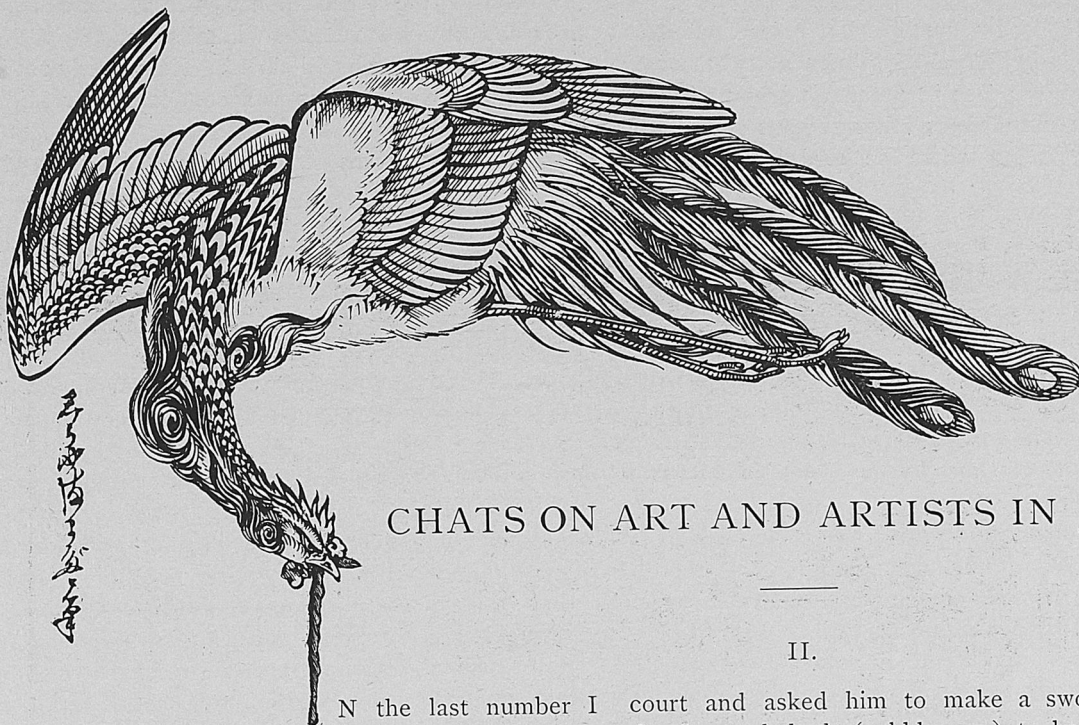
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## CHATS ON ART AND ARTISTS IN JAPAN.

### II.

IN the last number I gave a short review of the conditions which have caused the knowledge and appreciation of art to be as general and as widespread as it is in Japan. In the present I wish to present a few sketches and anecdotal illustrations dealing more especially with the life of the artists.

Most of the artistic work ordered by the lords of the land was done on their own premises, either by artists who lived there continually and formed part of their retinue, or by specialists who were called for the purpose and remained in the house of the patron until the order was completed. In either case the artist was supplied with everything he needed—house, raiment, servants, pocket money were furnished while he was engaged at his work and a *douceur* commensurate with the artistic excellence of the result of his labor when he had completed it. All the materials necessary were furnished to him and he could arrange his hours to suit himself and take his own time, beginning or leaving his work at any hour he chose. It was always mutually understood that his labor was to be a labor of love and was never to degenerate into an irksome task. In this great empire where everything else had to be done by set forms and rules the artist alone was free to follow his own inclinations and the bent of his mind, untrammelled and unquestioned. Thousands of anecdotes illustrate this, and it may be worth while to give one or two, because they will prove more fully than any comments the state of affairs.

The rich and powerful Duke of Hossokawa once invited a celebrated bronze-worker to his

court and asked him to make a sword-guard of the finest shakudo (gold-bronze), to be ornamented with an autumn landscape and an ox in the foreground. It was just after the usual New Year's festival of nine days, when no one does anything like labor of any kind, that the artist arrived. He went to work with a will, mixed his metals, made his designs, passed on to the engraving and inlaying, and in three or four months had his sword-guard nearly completed. In fact, with the exception of the figure of the ox to be inlaid, it was done, to the full satisfaction of the duke, who, whenever he inspected it; was more than pleased.

But here all at once the artist was seized with a fit of laziness. Instead of completing his task he took his book, his pipe and tobacco, and day after day went out into a green lane leading into the country, and sitting down in the grass by the roadside amused himself smoking, reading and looking at the countrymen coming into town with their horses and cattle. Month after month passed by, the artist drawing his allowance with the most praiseworthy regularity, spending his days in such idleness, and his evenings in drinking wine with his colleagues, as was the custom. The summer had thus passed by and the year had well gone into September, when, at last, the duke's patience was slightly ruffled. Ordering the artist to be called into his presence, he asked him why, for nearly five months, he had not even made a pretense of completing the order entrusted to him.

"I could not, your Highness," was the reply.

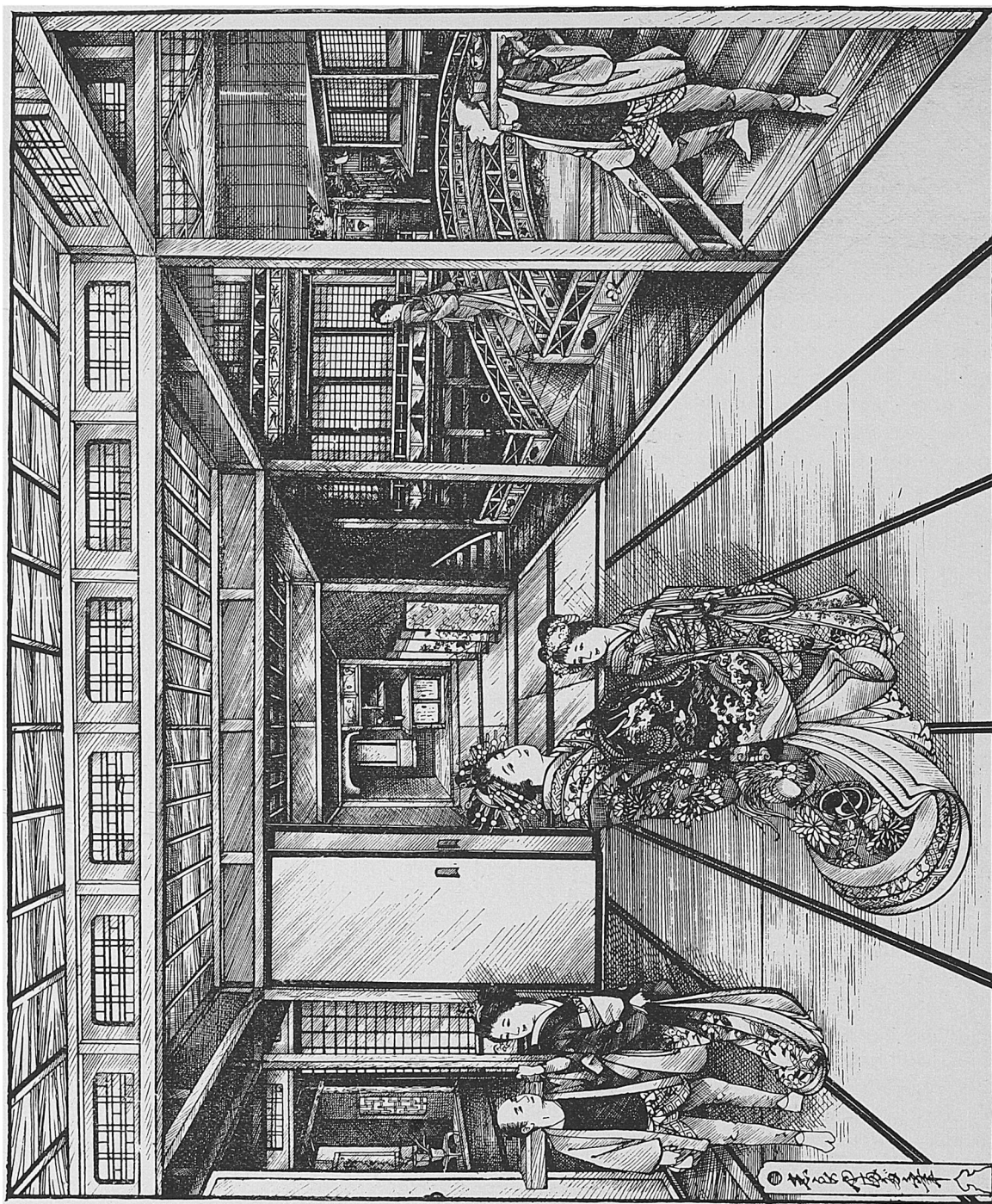
"And why could you not?" was the query.

"Your Highness asked me to make an autumn

landscape with an ox in the foreground. I had never made such a combination before. When it came to making the animal I knew not whether the expression of its face in autumn might not be different from what it is at other seasons of the year. I have been out to where the herds of cattle come

in, watching them through late spring, through summer and now when autumn has begun, and it was necessary that I should do so. I am nearly ready now and in a short time will complete your Highness' order."

The answer was deemed fully satisfactory; the



Drawn by SHIRAYAMA DANI.

A JAPANESE HOUSE INTERIOR.

artist was not again questioned or disturbed, and his work when completed received the highest praise.

Even if this story were not true—although it does not look at all improbable to one who knows

Japan well—it is significant of the state of feeling prevailing. It was told to me incidentally when looking over some old sword-guards, the narrator, an humble shop-keeper, having no thought of its possible extravagance, and merely wishing to illus-



trate the time and study necessary to complete a work of art.

His Excellency Mr. Kuki, at present Japanese ambassador at Washington, the president of the National Art Society of Japan, and acknowledged to be the foremost art critic and connoisseur in that country, has given me a number of incidents, thoroughly authenticated, illustrating the artistic spirit and feeling which I have here attempted to describe. I will repeat one, even at the risk of too great prolixity on this point.

Shintaro Shōshō, Duke of Bizen, sent Hanabusa Itcho, the celebrated artist of Yedo, a request for a picture, the subject to be a flight of Hoto-togisu winging their way across the face of the full moon. The request was accompanied by a purse of 500 gold rio (dollars). Such a commission at that time could be considered fully equal to a Vanderbilt or an Astor nowadays sending a request for a picture to a Meissonier or a Munkacsy, accompanied by a preliminary check for \$25,000. The duke waited a full year for his picture, and when no picture and no reply came, as a gentle hint that he was still waiting he sent the artist another purse of 500 gold rio. This time the answer was not delayed. It came at once, and with it were returned the duke's 1,000 gold rio. The artist replied that ever since receiving his Highness' commands he had watched at the period of every full moon for a good opportunity to make the requisite study from nature, but had not yet succeeded in being fortunate enough to do so. It was impossible to say when he would be able to do it; it might take him five, ten or fifteen years; it might be that he would never see a flight of such birds in such a way as to be able to reproduce them correctly, and he therefore returned the duke's magnificent present. He would make it his business to diligently watch for such an opportunity, and if it came would make the drawing at once and send it to the duke, who could then remunerate him as he chose.

Facts like these certainly speak more plainly than any comments could do.

In interpreting nature the Japanese artist has never followed her blindly and bigotedly. He represents nature, he does not imitate her. In spite of his contemplative, studious ways he has an ardent, excitable, imaginative temperament which leads him to strike out for himself, but wherever he does so he is guided by those rules of simplicity, of harmony, of color effect, of picturesqueness, which he has originally learned from nature, and which, with him, have become almost an instinct; and not only with him alone, but with the people generally. The extent to which appreciation of art has permeated all classes of the people must seem utterly

incredible to one who has not witnessed it. I will relate an instance in support of it.

For many years I lived in the outskirts of Yokohama, in the Japanese portion of the town, on a hill where the official residences are located. At the foot of it was a large government coal yard, where hundreds of coolies worked twelve hours a day carrying baskets of coal on their backs from the yard to the boats in the canal opposite. Their wages were from 22 to 28 cents a day, paid every day. When they quit work a number of itinerant peddlers were waiting for them on the street to get a part of their earnings. And what had they for sale? Fruit, of course, and sweetmeats, etc., but a full third of them probably offered flowers, bits of painted pottery, often badly cracked and broken, illustrated books, pictures and sketches. Hundreds of times have I seen a group of two or three of these coal-begrimmed coolies discuss the merits of a sketch costing two or three cents, or of a painted broken pot costing half as much.

When the cherries are in bloom the time is celebrated as a festival in Yedo, and all classes of the population to the number of hundreds of thousands take a day off and go out to look at the cherry blossoms in the outskirts of the city, where the trees stand on both sides of the highways. The same thing happens when the plum trees are blossoming, and, to a lesser extent, when the wisteria, the chrysanthemum, the lotos and others are in bloom. When the moon is full and the atmospheric conditions are favorable, it is the correct thing, for those who can afford to do so, to hire a boat and enjoy "tsuki mi" (looking at the moonlit landscape with the moon reflected in the water). Of favorite scenic landscapes the Japanese are not content with one view, but want it reproduced in all its changes. The books on the mountain Fujiyama give a hundred different views, showing it with every variety of shifting cloud scenery and changing atmospheric conditions.

The taste for simple artistic effects shows itself in all the surroundings of the Japanese, in their houses and dresses, in the covers, binding and illustrations of their books, in the way they arrange flowers, in the arrangement of the shelves and wares in their shops, in their gardens and courtyards, and so on ad infinitum. It is seen to its best effect in the interior decoration of their houses. We can hardly at first call what is here presented to us, interior decoration; nothing like paint or varnish, hardly any furniture, comparatively bare walls and only a very few ornaments. A closer examination shows us that there is indeed considerable labor expended in the unpainted and unvarnished woodwork, in the windows and in the arrangement of posts, pillars

and fixed shelves and the cabinet work generally. Yet everything in the room, down to the ornaments, is in such exquisite proportion to the whole as to seem to form part and parcel of it, and no single feature stands out preëminently. Whatever color there is is distributed in the same way, and the effect produced is that of quiet, delicious harmony.

Mr. James Jackson Jarves, in his "Art of Japan," made a very happy comparison in speaking of its decorative art when he says: "There are persons who take possession of our spirits in this same quiet, interpenetrative way and for the moment fill us with blissful consciousness of their own happy measure of being, just as others provoke discussions or stir up latent antagonisms. Now the crowning merit of the best Japanese decorative art is precisely of the former kind, which is most rare in all art."

The disproportion between the apparently simple effect produced and the time and labor expended upon it, is often so great as to strike the average foreigner dumb with amazement. I once stopped for lunch at a little country inn far back in the province of Shinshin and completely off the route of ordinary travellers. The humble character of the house may be judged from the fact that the meal for three of us, myself, servant and a coolie carrying baggage, cost just 13½ cents in all. It is very inexpensive to travel in state in Japan. The four walls of the room to which I was conducted were beautifully decorated to show spring, summer, autumn and winter, with the flowers and fruits and the foliage belonging to them, and over each

was spread the tint peculiar to the season depicted. Japan is rich in evergreen trees and I noticed especially with what skill their peculiar shade of green was here given. The whole, however, differed in its effect from anything I had heretofore seen in Japan, looking something like an old Venetian mosaic, only far more soft and subdued.

Upon inquiry I found that this work had all been done by the father of the landlord, an old "Inkio," who, however, in honor of the distinguished arrival was helping in the kitchen to prepare the meal. I learned from him that the "pictures" were indeed a complicated piece of work, being made up of thousands of pieces of shell, pebbles, minute pieces of leaves and seaweed dried and prepared by some peculiar process, minute particles of wood and a number of other materials, all imbedded in the plaster or whatever the groundwork was composed of. Here and there were added a few strokes with the brush to fill out the outlines.

I asked the old man how long it had taken him to do this work and he replied, "Five years." He added, that with the experience he had gained he could now do it a little quicker, and as the room we were in was in an old part of the house which had become shaky and would not last much longer, he was about to arrange such a room in the newer main building. From the way he spoke he certainly attached no artistic value to his work, nor did any one else in the house; it was merely looked upon as a pleasant way of spending time by one who had plenty of that commodity at his command.

*Louis Wertheimer*

